

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**MOGAN CULTURAL CENTER
LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
KHMER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT I**

**INFORMANT: DOMNANG PIN [CAMBODIA]
INTERVIEWER: ?, JEFF GERSON, AND MEHMED ALI
DATE: JULY 16, 2003**

? = OTHER INTERVIEWER

D = DOMNANG

J = JEFF

A = ALI

**Tape 03.12
Side A**

?: Today is July 16th, 2003. We're here at 73 Bellevue Street to interview Donnang. Hi, how are you?

D: Good, how are you?

?: What is your name please?

D: My name is Donnang Pin, and Pin is my last name, Donnang is my first name.

?: Can you spell your whole name please?

D: Yes, Domnang is spelled, D O M N A N G. And Pin is spelled, P I N.

?: Okay, when were you born, and where please?

D: I was born in 1965 in Cambodia. My hometown is a small village called Domdack District, and Siem Reap Province, in Cambodia.

?: How long did you live in that Province?

J: Can I just, can you just spell that, the town if you can?

D: Okay. I was born in Domdack Province. Domdack is spelled, D O M D A C K Province. Also they call the same, Domdack District in Siem Reap Province. I'm sorry, Domdack is a commune in district, and Siem Reap is the Province of Cambodia. So Siem Reap has most of the Cambodia temples in there [heritage] temples.

J: Sorry.

?: Okay. How long have you lived in Domdack District?

D: Well I was just born there, and I lived down there, since I was born I remember my Mom told me I lived there for five years. And then the age of five I moved into Phnom Penh because the war. I heard the bomb dropping, and I tried to escape. And my whole family was, escaped from Domdack to Phnom Penh, it's the capitol city of Cambodia.

?: Now how did you get from Domdack to Phnom Penh?

D: That was in 1970, and we tried to escape because it's a lot of Vietnamese soldiers told over Domdack District. And my whole family is a big huge family, have nine children, including me, and everybody was all female, and I only, I'm only a son in the family. So my mom and my dad very concern about that. And we have seen a lot of violence going on in that time. So we escaped to Phnom Penh by boat, by small boat. So across the Tonle Sap, as you see the Cambodian map, it's connected, Siem Reap, Domdack to Phnom Penh by lake. There's a big huge lake, and you can cross that lake like an ocean.

J: You said 1970. (D: 70) Did you mean 1980?

D: '70.

J: 1970 that the Vietnamese (--)

D: Yes, there was a Khmer Rouge revolution that time. I believe that Vietnamese was supporting Khmer Rouge. And they had the revolution of their communist regime to fight with the Republic, Cambodian Republic. And we get support from United States in that time.

J: Because the Khmer Rouge were in power from '75 to '79.

D: Correct. Correct, but (--)

J: And then the Vietnamese invaded (D: Yes) in '79.

D: No, that was another story, but before then, when Cambodian [unclear] King resigned, or they say they do, you know, they take over the King.

J: [Unclear], they forced them out.

D: Yah, they forced them out and then another Cambodian leader called [unclear] was half, set up the country as a republican, and connected with, supported with, from America. I have seen a lot of American people, not soldier, but people, working in there. And then Cambodia start to organize, I mean the revolutionary troop you know, in the jungle. And then I saw the Vietnamese soldier was supporting, that was the communists they call Khmer Rouge Revolution Group from the countryside. You know, kind of fight over and take some kind of a place in the country area, countryside area. So Domdack is a Province close to the jungle in Siem Reap Province. So from the northeast. So they got, they took over that district in that year, in 1970. And I remember I saw the Vietnamese soldier with ak47s, come to my house and ask you know, to live you know, in that house. So my whole district was filled up with the soldiers with the black clothes, and like Khmer Rouge dress, with the [car tire] shoe, they're made from the [tires], you know. So then my father, who have lot of daughters, very concern about what's going to happen to the family. So we tried to escape from that region, to the Phnom Penh. So that [year] we took the boat across the Tonle Sap River, which is a very big huge river in the country.

?: Did you face any complications traveling from Domdake to Phnom Penh?

D: A lot.

?: Like such as?

D: We very, very, very struggled. Very, very dangerous, and if they caught you, you can get, you can get killed, or you know, punished. We took, usually the big huge lake like that, you can't use a small boat across that lake, but we did anyway, because we had no choice. So we survived it, with nature and also with the soldiers.

?: How long did it take you to get from there to Phnom Penh?

D: Yah, well I was only five years old, and I think I don't really remember much, but my sister will keep telling the story. Also, I can remember from what she told me, it took like about a week, yah, to cross the lake, because we not just keep on going. We go and stop, we go and stop, because the soldier all over the place. You have to try to escape from them. And fake them, or make sure that they don't, you know, they don't realize that you tried to escape from the occupation.

?: When moving to Phnom Penh, what did you guys do there? Did you have relatives that lived there?

D: Yes, I have one of my sister live in Phnom Penh, because she went to school in Phnom Penh. And she got married with her husband in Phnom Penh. And she was living in Phnom Penh. So we just came to her house.

?: What did your sister do as a profession?

D: She is, she worked as a Red Cross, International Red Cross from Switzerland, called, what they called [Unclear] International. I think it's French language, working to help with the kids who their father or their mother was, got killed from the war. So that organization went to the battlefield and seek for the kids. When they got the kids they put them into one center, and they feed them and they help them. So my sister worked with them.

?: How old was she at the time? How old were your other sisters?

D: That was my oldest sister. She was I believe, she right now is fifty something years old. But that time I believe she's about twenty, twenty-five.

?: And how many sisters did you have?

D: Have eight.

?: Eight? Wow. What, are they all older than you?

D: Yes.

?: You're the youngest? He was the youngest one, younger boy. What did your parents do in Domdake before they moved to Phnom Penh?

D: Um, my mother was a farmer, yah, and she doing rice, growing rice as most of the Cambodians did. And also at the summer, at summertime she collecting fruit from different jungles, to another jungle. Use elephant to transport it at the time. And my father was a tailor, you know, cut shirt, designs, [draws them]. Tailor was that called?

?: Tailor.

D: Tailor! So he very good in the towns. Like in the district everybody was, you know, recognized him as the best, you know, tailor in the town. And he teach other younger people who interested, want to learn how to do that. And running a business with that. So he's doing okay with that.

?: When they moved to Phnom Penh, did they keep the same profession, or they changed it?

D: Oh, my father does. He keeps the same business, and then my mother just stay home watching you know, younger kids, because my sister got married and they got little kids. So my mother was kind of a housekeeper in the house, the whole house.

?: So how was life compared living in Phnom Penh, as I mean, compared to Domdake? Was it better, or the same?

D: Um, that I don't really feel as better or the same, because I'm very little kid in Domdake. I don't really feel that what I'm doing anything, but in Phnom Penh it's very crowded people, and I couldn't go anywhere. I didn't have a chance to go you know, anywhere. As I live in the countryside I have like more freedom. Like running around in the rice field, swimming onto you know, the small [unclear], and you know.

?: Did you go to school in Phnom Penh?

D: Yes, I went to school in Phnom Penh.

?: Did you study art?

D: At that time, no. I was in kindergarten school. Yah. [All chuckle}

?: They had art then. [Laughing]

D: Yah. I was seven years old at that time.

?: How long did (--) Did you live in Phnom Penh during the Khmer Rouge, when the Khmer Rouge starting taking power, or no?

D: No. In 1975 Khmer Rouge took over the country. So they come to Phnom Penh. I remember that was New Years, April 17th. It was like still in New Years. New Years is April 13th, when I was (--) April 17th I saw a lot of you know, truck loaded with black you know, uniform soldiers with the ak47, and some heavy weapons. And there was screaming and shooting to there. You know, very aggressive, come to the town. And everybody was like kind of you know, greeting them, you know, say oh welcome to you know, the town and stuff like that. I was playing cards with my whole family, because the New Year we were playing cards. So we just have fun. I won a lot of money that time. I feel very good. [Unclear] I won everybody's money. You know, the whole family, you know, you spread out the money and you play, the whole family. So I was like, yah, I'm a winner! And then I heard the guns shooting and the bombs dropping and something, and some house burning in the town, and a lot of people was like running around trying to get everybody to come looking for their family and stuff. So we living in the center of 50 to 60 baby kids, and teenagers from the, from the program, because we are hired to you know, the program, they bought a house in the village for use to take care of the, make as a center to take care of all those orphan kids. So we kind of prepare ourselves, you know, kind of protect from, gathering anybody who go to the street. And some, I saw you know, through my windows that a lot of people was very happy to go on to the street, they greeting to the you know, the newcomers. Then that time I was like very scared of the gun shooting. I saw Khmer Rouge black scarf, a red scarf and blue scarf on their heads, and they're shooting the gun everywhere.

?: Did your family support the Khmer Rouge, or they were against it?

D: None of my family support them. They were scared. They [really understand], because we run away from them. So we know exactly who they are. But the people who never know, they support them from the beginning. So they don't know what's going on. They don't know that these people is the killer, but we know it because we were living with them for a couple of months before we escaped in the year of '70.

?: So when the Khmer Rouge started invading Phnom Penh, did you guys stay in the city, or you guys tried to escape?

D: Well they come into our center, our village, and then they tried to chase everybody out. And we told them, my sister, on the radio with, because they chase all of the foreigner out of the, in the house. So we contact through the radio, like walkie-talkie. And then when Khmer Rouge come in, they thought we are working for the government, or soldier, they were about to shoot my brother-in-law and my sister. And we say, no, no, no, we are working with the kids, we have no connection with the government at all. So then we explained to him and they understand. And they go and check into the house. They saw a lot of orphan kids, you know, babies, young kids through the teenager living in there. So, and then their leader kind of stopped the soldiers not to bother them, us, and say that you wait here, you don't leave here for now, but you wait here until we tell you what to do. So two days later, after everybody left, you know, they come and say you got to leave too. So then they gave us a truck. So we put all of the people in the truck, and we had a big huge trailer. So we put all of the people, baby and the kid, into the trailer and we have two cars behind us. So total is three, together. They gave us a car and a trailer. And then they (--) At that time I'm very, very scared, because I can't believe that it's happened you know, to the whole city like that. We were stopping at, you know, we [unclear]. So my father was, because they asked us where's your hometown. And then my father told all of my sisters, say, we had a meeting in the family, say, don't tell him our real hometown, because we escaped from them in the year '70. And if we go back those people won't like us. So we tell them, you know, a different town. So then they chased us out to that town. So that was the east, east coast of Cambodia. That instead of north, we go to east. On the way to the east, two days that people escaped from the town did not go far. They moved only about ten miles from the town, because very, very crowded people, and they couldn't move, you know, fast. So it's only thirty minutes we driving we catch up to the real crowded people who are still on the road toward east. So I'm still in the part of Phnom Penh, but it's like, it's a (J: Suburb) yah, suburb. They call it the [Khmao]. If anybody know that, it's the [Khmao]. It's about not even ten miles from the center of Phnom Penh. And then at night they make us to live in one building. That building is like an empty building. It's a lot of you know, empty rooms and stuff like that. And we kind of live in there for, to rest in there. And then they allow us to go back and get all of the baby food in our home. So my sister and my brother-in-law went with the Khmer Rouge soldier back to the town and got all of the milk and supplies for the babies and the kids. And that night I remember that because in the back of that building was burning, and I saw a lot of bodies was in there. On the way that we moving out you know, very slow, we saw a lot of people, a lot of dead bodies, you know, [unclear]. I don't know if they are soldiers or not, but there was civilians, you know, dressed. So there was that you know, everywhere along the road. I saw them, some of

them they had the cover, some of them don't have the covers. So it made me scarier and scarier. And at night when we rest in there, and I heard a lot of gun shoot, I heard the people screaming, you know, to that. And they walk across of my building. Every five minutes I saw people walk across with the soldier pointing the gun on them. So, and unbelievable at the morning when you wake up, you walk out of the door, you look into that place that you heard the gun shoot, a thousand people is like up to the trees, that where the gun shoot. And how they killed them, they forced them to climb up to the top of the you know, the body, and then shoot them. And within one night, like a thousand of them, like this under the tree. And the tree is you know, it's about I mean, it's very, very unbelievable. It's very, very scared. It's very, very violent, and that image can't get away from my mind. I never forget about it, because I saw it in my eyes, I was seven years old and I remember that. Oh my gosh, and I was like shake, and my mom and my sister, and my dad even tried to you know, cover my eyes, don't want me to look at that. It's very scary. Then, after then we left and we keep moving until everybody was put out to the different section, to the different district, you know, to the countryside and stuff like that. So we went to one place called [name unclear]. It's still in the Province of Phnom Penh, but it's kind of very, it's size of this town. And there was a temple in there, they put us in the temple. So that is the place that they took all of the kids from us. So any kid that's not relating to us they took it away. So I don't know where they took it to. And I don't know, those kids, you know, how they, what they're doing with those kids. I heard that the little kid, the little baby, they killed them all, because nobody take care of them. And the teenagers they save and then put in one as a group. And we couldn't remember how, you know, we have no connection with those kids. And my sister, you know, [raised], suffer. And when we left that day the kid was crying and all of my whole family crying, because we don't want to leave each other. But this is their demand. So you have to do it, you have to do it. So, and then later on they put us as the regular people, and live with the crowd of people over to the [unclear], through the small town, very far from the town. And that day they took all of my brother-in-law, all the male adults, they took them away. And they said that they say that they're going to send them only three days to, you know, to the [UNHCR] training. So they train them to be you know, big, normal people, because they have something relating to the government or something like that. So what they do, they took them away and maybe they killed them, because I never see them anymore. One of my brother-in-law returned after two years, I mean after one year. And he, I can't recognize him when he returned because he changed everything. He's very skinny. He's very scared. He never talk. And my sister, all my family tried to ask him about the other brother-in-law that went with him. He said that if you want me to, if you want me to live, don't ask me any questions. So within a few months he never survived. He passed away. So we, then we still don't know what's going on with, you know, our relative who, who went to them. So we consider they died, because we can't, we didn't hear from them anymore.

? Since your whole family separated to different groups? Did you have any family members with you though, throughout the whole time? You know, like you had your sisters with you.

D: Yah, the whole time in that year we had to whole family with, you know, in a group. But after they took all of my brother-in-law out, and then they separate us again. Me, they sent to the camp with all of the same age of my kid, my age. I was about eight years old at that time, and with other kids who are nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen. And my sister, they send her to another camp with adults, I mean, the teen, or adults and stuff. So, because at that time I, I still recognize my feeling in that time as a kid. I was crying every day, every night. I want to be with my mom. I want to be with my dad. And I want to be, I want to go home. And they were like scream at me, they were like threaten me, anything that I was scared. I couldn't imagine. I was so scared of them. It was like, you know, sometime they kick me, you know, they punish me because I'm crying at night. I couldn't sleep. Then finally they brought me back home, because we need, the whole family need to move out from the east to west. So from the east of Cambodia, that town, to west, it took about one week on the train. So we, we, we have a trip to um, from the east to west, what a town called Battambang Province. And the whole family was come. Call up from every different camp to come together. And now we get on the truck and come together to the, to the west coast of Cambodia, called Battambang Province. And during that [three year], eight months, there's a lot of story in there. I couldn't tell you in only one you know, hour. There's a lot of story. I have been died four times in my life. Right now I'm telling you, I say I died, I pass away, which mean I passed away. I couldn't breathe it, I couldn't move it, I know it, I passed away, because I'm a dead person now. But then I still have kind of a spirit, you know, telling me that you need to survive, you know, and kind of motivate me to live. You know, and I was thinking about, "How can I live?" because I couldn't breathe anymore. I couldn't breathe. First thing I was thinking about, I had to try to move my finger, or my toes. Then I tried to move it, and I move it. Then I can move my toes, and I can feel it, oh, I can move it. Then I move my legs, and I move my hand, then I can breathe back. But I couldn't believe that I can do that in that time.

?: What was going on at that time? Why were you so stiff? Why were you feeling (--)

D: Pass away? Because I had no food for three days and three nights. No food at all, and they force you to work very hard. I was a kid, and I worked as an adult in the rice field. And there was a soldier behind me all the time. If I don't to it, they punish me, either kick me, or hit me with something. I got a lot of bruises all over my body. And I, when we finished, everybody, not just me but the whole people in the camp, but they were bigger and I was a little kid in that time. And when we come to the camp, they have no food at all. I don't know why, they have nothing, just water. So everybody, they bigger than me, they know how to hunting, or fishing for the kind of little animals in the water, like Cambodian [unclear], like a shell, you know, lake shells and stuff like that so you can survive, or frog, little tiny frogs that you can grab it on the rice field. Anything move is food in that time. So if you see anything move, you can catch it and put it, consider it as a food. And then you go back to the camp, you just put in to the fire, and burn it, and you eat it.

?: You said you passed away four times. Were all of those four times because of food?

D: That one is because I was starving to death, and two is a disease. They sent me to another camp, which is working very hard, what they call making, I don't know how they call it. [Speaks in Khmer] It's like you're making the whole (--)

A: Irrigation ditch?

D: Yes, to store the water.

A: Okay. [Unclear]

D: It was like two miles square.

A: Oh, a reservoir?

D: Yah, something like that. I don't know what that's called, but they let you dig up you know, that's in the ground, and you put that in (--)

A: On the sides?

D: On the side, like two, two miles, and then squared. And then the rainy season, digging up, the water is going to be there, and they're going to hold all the water in there. They send all of the people from all over the place over there. It's very far from the village. You walk one whole day to arrive there. So like you walk on the line. I saw people walking like a soldier in the you know, battlefield for one day, you know. And you arrive there, they have nothing in there. You need to build up a place to live. So you kind of try to get some tree to put it up and make it, you know, tie it up and you put all of the, you know, something to cover it so you don't have to stay, you know, under the sun. It's protecting you from the sun, and very, very hot summer. And at night it's very cold. And no water, and you have to dig up, find the water, or you can go walking, try to find the water. The first day you don't have to work, but the next day you need to work. So everybody kind of very tired and you know, die around the same time you die out. And I can survive like a month, after that I got a very big fever, what they call [unclear]. And nobody, I mean nobody really paid attention to me anymore, because they thought I would die, because I couldn't move. I was, after that I kind of choke, I couldn't breathe. And my whole body very skinny like a bone. I don't have nothing to eat. And I thought, I feel like I couldn't survive this time because I have no energy at all, nothing. I couldn't move, I could not breathe. So I dream that (--) I have a big dream. When I close my eyes I was like gone. Then I kind of dreaming like I saw a lot of ghosts. I saw a lot of angels, everything. This is like terrible thing come to me, and laugh at me, or whatever. And I saw a lot of [unclear] things. It's like everything that you cannot imagine, you know, scare things. And then all I remember, now you going to ask me how I can survive, right?

? Yah.

D: You were waiting for that. Okay. It was a soldier, female, Khmer Rouge soldier, female that in charge in the camp. Not in charge, but in the camp. I don't know what her position is. She's about, I was about eleven, eleven years old, ten years old at that time. And she's about twenty-five, or twenty-six. She's pretty. She, she come to me and give me one shot, and with that liquid, it's a red liquid. I don't know what that medicine is called, but only one shot and she got it. She tried, she do that on you know, she tried to hide it from everybody. So she do it at kind of, at the very early in the morning when everybody left the camp to work. So I was alone by myself. And it's like when you see the picture in the S21, and the prisoner was like lying down there, and it's only one bowl and a spoon next to them, but it's empty, have nothing in there. Just water in there, and nobody care about anybody, you know, they went. They all went out. I was by myself. And there was, then it's rainy and I have nothing cover me. And the rain come through that cover because it's not plastic, it's just a tree. So it come through and I was sweat all over the place. I smell very terrible, because everything in there, I couldn't move. So they about to put all of the [unclear] on me. It kind of made me like a [unclear] in there. She just went and then give me a shot. When I, when I opened my eyes I saw her very, you know, [unclear]. So that one shot it saved my life. I survived from that. I don't know what that medicine is, but it's only one shot I survived. And she just walked away. She didn't say any word. I don't even know her face, you know, I just, I can't see her face clear because I couldn't open my eyes in that time. So that's a second time.

?: Could you tell us about the third and the fourth?

D: Do you still have time for that?

?: Yah.

D: Um, okay. The third one is when after I survived from that I was moving to, back to the town and they send me to the regular camp. That one is a special camp. So they send me to regular camp. I, I was with my mom only a few days, and then they send me out and I don't want to do. But then what they do, I tried to hide it from them, and then my sister was scared of them, because they threatened to kill the whole family. They said you, you got to send him back to UNHCR. And then you got to looking for him, because we couldn't find him, you know, I hide from them. Then what happened is my sister set me up, you know, for UNHCR, because she so scared that they going to take the whole family out. Then when I come home, my sister called me, you know, bring me home. When I come home she tell them to come and pick me up. When she come and pick me up, when the Khmer Rouge come and pick me up I was like try to run from them, and then they catch me and then pull me out of my, my house, my mother's house. And in one of my hand I grabbed you know, the pole, say that I don't want to go. And then my mother is crying. I'm crying, because I don't want to leave. I know that if I leave I'm going to die. And I'm, all I feel is I got hit from behind with a stick like that, and I was like unconscious in that time. And my hand is very [pull], that pole is very strong and they couldn't pull me out. And my sister helped them pull me out. And then, you know, they kind of you know, pull me on the ground like the movie. You can see the movie, the cowboys shooting each other, they pull them through the horses. The same thing. They

pull me out. And I heard my mother was crying and saying, "Why are you doing that to your brother?" and stuff like that. And those sisters right now, live in Lowell right now and she's mental illness, my sister.

J: Suffers from this illness?

D: I think yah, she suffer and she become mental illness, and she lives next to me in Lowell right now. So that is just a little bit. I don't feel like you know, it's a big deal to my life, but what I said is when I, you know, they put me out. They put me into the camp at [unclear], the place that they, they put all the, you know, the kids together and they're going to send them to the, the camp outside the village. So that time is a lot of bugs, a lot of mosquitoes you know, bit me up in the night. And then in the morning you know, they bring all you know, like a hundred kids from the town, from the village to the camps. Living there, there's very, very hard work, hard work in camp. Then I have a problem with one of the, you know, the camp leader in there. And then they beat me up. Oh I got a lot of abuse from them. At night I feel like I can't stay here because then I, you know, I feel like I have to, I have to escape from them. So that time is a very, very terrible, I consider as you know, very dangerous for me in my life. Because what happened at night, I saw the moon outside about midnight, and then I left the camp. And I didn't realize that a lot of soldier was you know, was, got ready to catch people who escape on the you know, run away. So, but I'm lucky those soldiers are sleeping at that time. Ten of them with AK47, sleeping on the way like that. And this side is water, is a lake. This side is a lake. You cannot, no where you can go on the lake, because it's very deep and very far. And I'm just a little kid. I cannot swim that far. So what I'm doing is like I have to you know, [unclear] feel like, oh God, if they caught me I'm going to die in that time. So I have to do it. So I just walked, just closed my eyes and walked across them. Ten of them were from here to over there. They sleep like that. Oh my God, if they caught me they're going to shoot me, or they're going to kill me right there. So I passed them. I passed them. I ran very, very, you know, I closed my eyes, say, "Thank God I passed [unclear]," and then go through that about twenty miles I was, I saw um (--) Anybody believe in ghost here? I don't believe in ghost, but it happened. I don't know if that's a ghost, or really, or because of my, my you know, my spirit, my mind kind of lone, too much lonely in that time. Walking across the rice field at the middle of the night, and hear nothing and see nothing, but of course they have the light from the moon. I saw the people have the vehicle, I mean what is that? That go and they're called um?

?: Wagon?

D: Yah, the cows there, they use a cows, it's like (--)

?: A plow?

D: Yah.

J: [Unclear]

D: Yah, I heard the human was chasing their cows forward and [makes hee sounds]. And I was like, "Wait for me! Wait for me! I want to go, you know, please help! You know, I tried to escape, wait for me!" And they don't say nothing to me and they just like disappear. I, where's the (--) Why you so bad, you know, you're not helping anybody? So then I was like, walk, keep walking and running, walking and running. I'm very suffer in that time. Then I saw the hill with a fire. I go down there, and it was the wintertime. Winter in Cambodia is like a spring over here. It's a little cold, at night very cold. So what people do, they, in the farm they make the [unclear] and then they had burning fire, you know, on the ground. So they sleep, to warm them up, so they sleep up here. Like I go, I see the fire. I say, "Okay, thank God I go and then kind of warm up with that." Then I was thinking, oh these guys live up here. And if he didn't realize that I'm down here, you know, warming up with the fire, and he's kind of surprised, he's going to you know, chop me with his knife, because he have like this long knife next to him. So I decide to wake him up. I'd wake him up. And then he's like, he'd wake up and then, "What you doing here? Where are you coming from?" And I tell him the whole story and he's like, "Oh my gosh!" You know what, in that room, you know, he pointed to that [house]. And he said, "In that house there's a soldier in there, they're waiting to catch you. Everybody, they caught everybody who escaped. Like they catch a couple of people already, and they killed them." And he was just, you know, he, he kind of, thank God that he tried to help me out. He's like, "You've got to move, you know, from here as soon as possible." So I that was, I said I'm very, very lucky that I crossed that (-)"

Side I ends
Side II begins

? : ...my God!

D: Okay, I'm very, very scared, and also very, very freezing. I couldn't walk anymore. And then what, I saw a couple, you know, cows was, was sit over, you know, because in Cambodia they was put in, it's a little far from their house, they was keep them outside. And they have like, the grass for them, food for them. And the cow was sleeping, it was laying down. So I'm like, I'm thinking about oh, the cows, maybe they have some heat in there. So I go down there, I touch the cows and the cows was like warming, and it's like you know, leaning to me. And like, "Oh, it's warm." So, and then I sleep next to the cows. It warmed me up for the whole night, and helped me out. So without them I was going to suffer, I couldn't continue to walk anymore. So that's how I escaped from the, you know, the third time. And you want to know about the fourth?

? : Yah.

D: All right, the fourth is not in Pol Pot, it's 1989. When I graduated from the University of Fine Arts on Phnom Penh, and the policy said that you got to work five years in order to receive your, your certificate, because that is a contract. You need to run, of teaching a class in the university for five years. And then I, I was doing martial art, I was running martial art class in the university to raise money to help myself to buy

the art supply and paint. And then, because I had the martial art skill. I was trained for five years and then I run a class in the university. So one of the students come from camp, because they like my style they want to practice with me. I didn't know that they come from Thailand camp. And after a month he said that he had to come back to the camp. I say, "What, you have, where, where you live?" He said, "I live in Thailand border in the Cambodian, ah, the international camp." "Really?" "Yes, I want you to go down there." So he wanted me to go to the Thailand camp with him. I said, "That's a good idea, because in here I have to run away from the soldiers who try to you know, grab you to join the soldiers." So everyday if you cannot escape you're going to be a German soldier. And that is the year 1987, 88 and 89. In the country they make more soldier to fight. So what they do, they just bring the trucks into the crowded town, and then they just split up the soldiers and grab the people who they thought can be used as a soldier, and send, and send them to their camps, and then send them to the border to fight. So I run away from them so many times. So then I decided to come to the camp with them. I said, "All right. I [unclear] and I want to go to the camp and see what can I do over there. Maybe I can see them." You know, because in the Cambodia that year you didn't know anything like in the [unclear], you know, block in from anybody. You don't know what's going on outside. You don't know what's happen, and all you see is the soldier every day. And all you see is the people just with the guns, you know, traveling back and forth. So I heard about the camps, and I want to see, and I want to you know, see the new thing. And then, and he promised that he know the way how to come to the camp. So I came with him, but that trip doesn't, you know, he doesn't know how to get back to his camp. He used me to help him, because he's, I don't know, he got caught two or three times inside the country, but you know, I help him out because I have some you know, money, and I just paid the soldier. I say, "Oh he's my relative. And here, I'm working and I'm a student in the University of Fine Arts. I'm a good citizen," and stuff like that. So you kind of get the money and they just, "Okay, I'll let you go." So finally, you know, following through the camp is very, very dangerous, but it's not a lot, I mean it's not very tough, only in that time when I escaped from Cambodia to the camp. I don't want to talk more detail about that.

There's some situation that happened to me too, but one thing I want to point out is, when I come back, escape from the camp again, to call my sister in the state here, there was a town, Thailand town, Thailand district that you can use the phone to call up to the United States here. So I want to call my sisters, tell them that I'm in a camp right now. So maybe you have a good connection. And so that time I brought one of my students. I was [unclear] and martial art class in the camp in that year 1989, and help with the foreigner from the states, her name is Janet, to find you know, the friend to help up with the school, the Fine Art in there. I teach like fifty to sixty kids, young people and adults, Cambodian art, drawing and painting, and sculpture. And also at the morning and evening I taught some of the martial arts skill and stuff like that. A lot of people kind of enjoyed the martial art, art skills. So nothing to lose. But then I need to call my sister. I tried, I got out of the camp. They said, "You're not allowed to get out of the camp." Then I take a choice, because I want to talk to my sister. Then when I get out of the camp with my student, he had little boy, and he speak Thai very, very fluent like the Thai people. And Thai really like him because of his style and the way he speak. But I couldn't speak any Thai language at all. So then I got, I called you know, my sister. I

got into the town. It's okay when I come to you know, when the truck to the towns, it's all right. I connect to my sister. I talk to my sister in here. And then when I returned back I got the problem, because a few Thai [unclear] security. They caught me on the middle of the way. It's close to the camp all ready, but then they caught me out when we were walking. And they talked to the kid. The did can speak Thai to them, you know, they learned to trust the kid, but look at me? This doesn't look like Thai people at all. And then they talk Thai to me. I couldn't speak Thai to them. They start to beat me up. They beat me to death that time. They tried to find money, and I don't have any money at all, you know, not even a penny. So I have nothing with me. So they thought I was, you know, cheating on them, I don't want to give anything. I said that I don't have any money, and I asked you know, a little kid to tell them, I said can you tell them that I don't have money. And those kids had to tell them that. They don't believe it. So they beat me up. They kick me. They have one gun with three soldiers. With three people, one gun. The long gun, automatic gun with eight bullets, you know, that classic gun with eight bullets. Um, it's very long in comp (--) I heard it's called [unclear]. It means CKC. I think it's from Russian. Then I, it's like I was thinking about trying to escape, but then I got blood all over myself. And I tell the kid, say that you got to escape. I mean they not pay attention to those kid, because they thought the kid was Thai. I said, "Oh, you got to escape to the camp. Go tell everybody is I can't escape." And then, because that is only message I can get. I can tell the kid, you know, if they can escape, if they can come to the camp and tell all my friends, and you know, to tell my family that you know, pass. I mean I didn't die, because they going to kill me. They not going to let me go. They keep beating me up, and I was like, I just cover my face. I just try to block you know, protect myself from the point I can get killed from their boot, you know. They got a very strong boot and kick me. I got bleed out, you know, my nose, my ears, something like that. I couldn't, I just lay. No, I don't want to die like that, so I have to find a way to escape. So I was 70, I was 25 years old that time, in 1989. So after a few you know, like twenty, thirty minutes they got tired after they beat me up. They got, you know, they're tired. And I was like, they was kind of slowed down a little bit. They was talking, and then I was, try to find the way that I can run away from them. So it's a good, it's a good you know, [unclear] for me, because when they kicked me and I rolled over close to the guy who have the gun, and this guy doesn't really pay attention. So what I do, I just you know, when I roll over them, and I just got up and then got the gun and hit him in through the right spot. So he's just unconscious right away. And I just grabbed the gun and just you know, I didn't know how to shoot. I just point to them and they just, you know, one of them is running to me. So I used that gun like a stick to hit him through the head. And there's, you know, two down and one was runaway. And I couldn't have much energy at all. If I feel like if that time they come back to me I don't know what to do. Just, I almost you know, run out of power. So I just dropped the gun the same time when they run over there, and I run over here. So I just keep running, and walking for ten, fifteen minutes. I look at my back, I saw like 20 soldiers with the gun shoot me from behind, shoot through me, you know. It's about from here to you know, the street, you know, the big, the main street.

A: Chelmsford Street?

D: Yah. So I was like keep running, keep walking, keep running. And they shoot me. I heard that you know, if I cannot you know, escape from that I'm going to get hit from the bullet, I'm going to be dead. So that is my, my fourth time. So luckily when I arrived in the border of the camp, because they have a lot of high fence, like a jail, you know, fence all around, you cannot cross it. You have to go around from the entrance, and I don't have time to go around to the entrance. So luckily one tree was [laid out to that fence]. So because you know, you try to survive, you don't know how much energy you have, but you just, you do your best. You just ran into that tree and jump over the fence, and then you got scratch, all this you know, bleeding and stuff like that.

A: From the fence? From the barb wire?

D: Yah, but not much, but because the tree has helped. You can just stand on the tree and jump over. I was like amazing. I'm like, Jesus, thank God that I can escape from them, because that, because they cannot run through the camp, because then the [Huna], who is the soldiers with the International Camp, they not going to let them in. So I escaped in that time. That is my last chance to escape.

?: Did you call your sister then, in the United States?

D: My sister know that I was in the camp, by sister doesn't know what happened to me in the camps. I didn't tell them. Until now I don't really tell.

?: Do you know what camp you lived in?

D: Khao I Dang Camp.

?: Can you spell that please?

D: K A O, then space, I, space D A N G.

?: How were you able to keep in contact with your sister. Like how did you know that she was in the United States when, like after your second death incident when you were kind of (--)

D: Well yah, in 1979, when the Khmer Rouge, you know, I mean when the Vietnamese took over Cambodia from the east, my family was called up everybody together and we were living together. And then my sister, for some reason that she was separated from the family in that time, because the whole family wanted to come to the northeast, and she want to go to the west south, which is different section, a different town, different village, different province. Then we separated, and then I was helping her to you know, move out her stuff and like that. Then she tell me that she's going to go to the border, because she heard that there are refugee in the border. And in 1984 she, or her husband, she got married (A: Unclear) by [unclear].

A: Okay.

D: In 1984 she got married to an American husband. And then he went to Cambodia looking for us. And he told us the whole story. And then that's how we connected. And then he gave me the number to contact my sister. I kept it in my pocket all the time. That's how I contacted her.

?: So she was the only one you were able to contact? What happened to your mom and dad?

D: In Cambodia they have no telephone communication at all in that year. They don't have any communication system inside Cambodia. Only soldier I think they might have some walkie-talkie system, but telephone, I don't think so.

?: Did you know where your parents were, or your other sisters?

D: Yah, after (--) Yes, I know. When I escaped from them, I mean from the town to the Thai camp, in that time I know that my sister, my parents live in Siem Reap.

?: Oh, and so they were still there. They didn't leave?

D: Actually I have only the mother. My father passed away in '76. He passed away with you know, no food, the same as what I (--)

?: What you went through, umhm.

D: Yah.

?: So how did you immigrate to America then?

D: That is, that's why, my sister already sponsor me since 1984, to the INS looking for myself. But the IOC couldn't find me in the camp, because I'm not in the camp. I was in Cambodia, and no way to contact to Cambodia in that time, because the communists [unclear] in that time. So then in '89 after I called her, she reported to the IR, ICOC. So ICOC is a program to help out with looking for people, and with immigration. So IOC contact, go to find me in the camp. So they found me.

?: Have you always resided in Lowell? Did you all live in Lowell? Or you lived some other place before?

D: I lived in Boston when I first come in. (?: Ah huh) I go to school in Boston for English program. And then I just have connection to Lowell, because I want to work with the community. So I volunteer to do some painting for the CMA. See in '83, [unclear] in '93,'94, and then that's how I connected with CMA, with at that time was [Som Khan Kuon] as like the director of the CMA. So that's how I communicate with Lowell. I work voluntary in Lowell a lot with the community.

? : Is that why you decided to come and live in Lowell now?

D : Yes.

? : How did you get to go to the University of Phnom Penh? Like after your third incident of passing away, what happened after that?

D : Um, yes, I was in the countryside in that time, after Khmer Rouge I mean, moving out of the country. I was moving. We separated the family, right, and I was moving to the northeast up the country called [Siem the Province] right, that [Siem the Province]. And then I go to school over there for three years. And then there was a lot of like I said, a lot of what you call, soldier tracking in the countryside. So it's hard to escape in the countryside, because the countryside is not a lot of people, and very, they have a lot of power in the countryside, you know, put too much, too pressure onto you. You had to go and joint the soldier. So then I asked my sister if I can go to Phnom Penh, you know, I don't want to join the soldiers. So, and then yah, my sister sent me back to Phnom Penh, and there was the school opened for, you know, they're looking for 72 students to fill up the school, University of Fine Arts.

? : How old were you at that time?

D : Um, (? : 25?) no. I was 25 in '89. I was about 12 or 14 years old. And then uh, no, no. I was 16, 17 years old. Yah, I'm bigger. Then I went to Phnom Penh, and then they say, they [unclear] that they have this selective students to fill up the University of Fine Arts. So I go through the process. They do exams, you know, they do exams, testing and stuff. So I, it's like a thousand, one, like twelve hundred applications applied for that. And they take only 72. So I was lucky, because before I go to exam, to the first exam, I was, can I get you one of the professor in the School of Fine Arts to work for them, to learn how to draw, how to kind of basic skills. And then, then I for a couple of weeks, then I go to take exam and I passed. That's how I got into the School of Fine Arts.

? : After moving from Boston to Lowell, what kind of job did you have when you first came here?

D : Before I'm coming here?

? : Yah, when you came to the United States.

D : Yah, I was, I got hired to work as um, like in a Youth Center in Chelsea, called ROCA, Reaching Out to Chelsea Adolescents. That is like a youth center, but that program was grow up from the [Unclear] Program to the Youth Center. So I was hired to work over there because there was a lot of Cambodian population in there at that time. So I was running classes, and doing home outreach, you know, working with kids, teenagers, gangsters, all kinds of stuff at, in the Youth Center.

? : Have you visited Cambodia since you came to the United States?

D: Yes, twice.

?: Twice? Can you describe the trip?

D: Sure. In 1995, after I worked with, I got hired in 1990 to work in the Youth Center for five years, and I decided I wanted to go back to my School of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh, because I feel like I, you know, a lot of Cambodian artists you know, living there, and very struggle, and no connection. And I feel like I should have, I want to build up the bridge that can support and help each other from Cambodian communities in the United States here to Cambodia. You know, using art as a bridge, you know, because the history of art (--) After I got to School of Fine Art, I found a lot of tremendous and fabulous things about Khmer art and history. So I feel like we kind of go underground right now, and we almost destroyed our heritage, and you arts and you know, and culture because of nobody would pay attention to it. So I tried to build up that bridge. I was thinking about all of my classmates, all of my professors as still survive right now, and if we can work together we can kind of support each other. So I went back in 1995 to see you know, to see what's going on in my school, what can I do to help? So the first time when I take off from the plane, I didn't go to my house yet. I just go directly to my School of Fine Arts with just a backpack. To me, I didn't bring anything with me, just a backpack. So I go down there, it's very, very sad, because it's empty. There's nobody there. I couldn't find any of my classmates. There was moving out. Everything was changed. A lot of professors was, was resigned from it. I see the new face and nothing happened there. So after a few days of searching, I found everybody passed, but they live in different area, but they just kind of, they have no access to school, they have no access to each other. So I set up, like a dinner and lunch, and you know, in my sister's house and invite everybody and talk about what my goals are. And the first thing I asked them, I don't know what to do, but the first thing I asked them, I said, "I have some, you know, money. I'm not rich, but I have some money. I want to support you guys, everybody. And what I want is to, for you to make up some of your art work, you know, I can bring back to the states and ask everybody in the states to help. I know this Cambodian community over there, we can display your artwork, and we can promote to the people who are interested about Cambodian art." And then they said, "What do you want me to do? What do you want me to paint?" I said, "All right." I was like, I don't know what, but I was like, "Okay, now how about this? How about tell, how about tell the world that what you want to tell, and then make that happen, make that painting." So that's what I (--) And after a week I give them you know, some of the twenty-five, thirty dollars, as much as I could to give them to buy supply and make a painting. So what I get after two weeks, guess what? That's all the image I got. The stories about the killing fields, Khmer Rouge, you know, the sufferers and everything. I didn't get any happy image at all. So holocaust, most of them, it's about what they've seen in their childhood, their you know, life. So I collect about 50 paintings from them, watercolor painting. Then I came back here. I set up at the organization called Cambodian Artists Assistant Projects, CAAP, and I set up a committee which I have people helping out, volunteer, we meet every week. Every weekend we're meeting, we talk about that. We want to promote that. Everybody kind of exciting, they want to do it, you know, including young people.

But then I have a woman artist from Ohio who helped out with the homepage, because she has the skill in there. She is a comic book writer. So she put up the homepage for the CAAP, and then got the donation from some people who want to donate \$25.00, \$20.00, whatever they want to put down into the artists. So we collect the money in 1997, we got about \$800.00, and we want to give back to the, we want to bring that money, I'll bring that money back to give to the artist as kind of to tell them this is what we have done so far, and want to you know, encourage them to keep on working that. And we display some artworks. Then we have donated from a company, a photo company, I think they give us a free printout painting so we don't have to carry the original, we can just carry the, you know, the poster. So for free you have a set of it, which is I still have it now. We can do, travel an exhibition about holocaust. And so we spread out a word a lot of people was kind of helping out, but the thing, when I brought that money back and give to the artist and my committee, up here in Massachusetts they're not, they kind of have some issue going on. So they have conflicts with each other. So they split up. They're not working anymore, and a lot of money was missed behind. I heard that we're suppose to have \$5,000 in that account from everybody donating, because they have the list of people donating. And those money was put into the account, and one, two people was in charge of it, but I miss the communicate. I tried to email them, they not answer me back. And then I end up [unclear].

J: Someone took the money.

D: Yah, I guess someone took the money. And I brought that in Cambodia. So I organized, the artist community was organized in Cambodia. And I have professor and artists working together. And we're looking to have like a center, you know, for them to just come in once a month, or twice a month to talk about Cambodia and then do the research, and kind of make document about Khmer art that are the whole nine yards. That idea that I put it down and work very hard. Three years I tried to find the fund in Cambodia, and nobody can help me. I have, I lack the resource skills, or finance skills. I don't have that kind of skills. So I don't know what to do with that. Then I have some friends to help me out with a proposal and stuff like that. And then my, my [power] was kind of running out. So I can't stay over there any more. I had to come back. But I also already set up, you know, the project over there and still have the connection. When I'm coming back, that's how I find out that my committee over here is not working anymore, and it spread out. It took me like two months to collect all of the artwork back. It was in a basement. Nobody cared about it. So I found [Janice Stakowski], who right now is helping me out with the project. So that's how we start up again. We changed the name because we don't want to have conflict with the old committee. And it doesn't mean I hate them, or I tried to discriminate, I mean eliminate them, but if they want to come back and help out, they have to go through the contract and paperwork.

J: The new group is called the Cambodian Artists Association, I think?

D: Correct. This is a new group now we call Cambodian Artists Association. We're on the way of applying for a [501C3]. We have done the proposal by law, paperwork. We submitted it to the group of lawyer to kind of review it, and then hopefully in the next

few weeks we can register to the city to have you know, legal and non-profit. And from that on, like all my life right now I was thinking about, I have enough suffer, and I don't want a young generation to have, you know, the same suffer that I crossed. So that's one thing that I can do, is to pick up what the value of their you know, their country and their culture used to have so they can appreciate themselves as a young generation to keep on going. Because I heard of some young people, or not just young people, adults too, they feel like they don't want to be Cambodian, you know, they want to be something else. They want to be China, or they want to be you know, whatever is not Cambodian, because they so afraid. They thought the Cambodian is a very kind of poor and cheap country, because they don't realize that their history is very fabulous. And through art you can see that Cambodia is very, very, very strong and very, very power in the past.

?: What accomplishment are you most proud of?

D: Art right now, yes.

?: Art?

D: Yah.

?: Good.

D: Like you see when you come into to [unclear] that I will try to put all of the image of Cambodia, originals to make it happen. Because now you can't, I don't think, if you don't see the real book about the Cambodian art, you didn't know what Cambodian lion look like. And now if you go to the temple, they're all destroyed. You can see just a part of it, but you don't see the whole piece of it. You don't see the whole decoration of it. It means a lot of things, and I want to educate this to the people who interested and want to promote it. And I encourage people to help out. And through my life it can make it success, I will be happy, and happy with that.

?: Do you have any final thoughts? Anything you want to leave behind to us?

D: I don't know, but as I say, this is what my, you know, my life. Art is my life right now. And again I want to encourage you or anybody. Your friend, or whoever you think that they was, they want to know about art and history of Cambodia, they should learn, they should go to art, because art took a lot of history in there.

?: I have a question. You were in the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Lowell? Do you have any connections with them?

D: I'm working.

?: Oh, you're working.

D: I'm a staff in Boys and Girls Club now. There's on two year contract to run the program called Targeted Outreach, which is the target kid who are at risk with joining a gang and stuff. And I think the Boys and Girls Club, they tried to create something that can connect into more Cambodian. Because they're located to Cambodian center, and an area right now. And we have no access, and not a lot of Cambodian kids have access to the Boys and Girls Club. So they like kind of hired me to become a liaison, and they allowed me to use art to create more activities for the boys, for the kids. But the same time make fifty kids, maybe a few of them are very serious. Now I train two of them, fourteen years old. They come to my studio every weekend. I teach them the art. I teach them the history of Khmer art and stuff, and hopefully those kids you know, become more you know, serious. If they are serious they can learn a lot about Khmer Art, and because I had the resources about that, I can you know, I don't know all of them, you know, all of the history, but I have resources to access to it. Like my professor, which is, the next project I want to bring him over here to be a lecture through the university, through the organization community about my art and history. So, his name is Professor [Bona], and he's the one to build up the Buddhist monument in Cambodia, and posting into the internet in the year 2002 I believe that like a million people participate to do the parade from Phnom Penh to you know, Kompong Speu, where they build up the new monument up to the top of the mountain, a big, huge big monument. And Cambodian Art is like monuments, temples, anything about religion, they use Cambodian art and image, but it doesn't mean that you know, you have to support Buddhist to be a you know, (? You're right) Cambodian art.

? Umhm. Okay, well thank you so much for having us interview you. We really appreciate it.

D: You're welcome

? I have one curiosity. I'm sorry for going off track. (D: Sure) Do you remember when you said they had people climbing up the trees to shoot them? Yah, well why did they shoot thousands of people and not you and your family?

D: Because us, they consider as a family, you know, as a family who will take care of fifty kids. And they're not (--) And those people that they shoot, they have a reason to shoot them. Either those people they target as a government, a soldier, or they refuse to leave the house, you know, and they, at night. So they found them. They kind of hunting for them, and they found them. They're not going to shoot them right away, but they're going to bring them to shoot them in one place so they don't have to clean up the mess.

? Okay. Thank you so much.

D: You're welcome.

J: Do you already work for someone at the university. You don't have to have this on. I'm just asking, are you already working with (--)

End of Interview